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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of 50 of the nation's best school superintendents to gain insight into their success. Researchers used a self-designed instrument, containing 38 quantifiable items in 5 sections: (1) the superintendent's background; (2) the superintendent's school district; (3) the superintendent's role; (4) the superintendent and his or her school board; and (5) the superintendent's leadership perspective. Surveys were sent to 50 superintendents. Responses indicate that more 77 percent had served as school principals at some point in their careers. No superintendent reported that he or she worked 40 or fewer hours; more than 85 percent worked 50 hours or more a week. Surprisingly, only 19 percent indicated daily symptoms of stress related to their jobs. More than 40 percent of the superintendents who needed to learn about school board/superintendent relationships went to the board chair, mostly using the telephone as their primary mode of communication with their boards. Seventy-five percent indicated that the majority of their role was that of leadership rather than management. All responding superintendents rated their own overall performance as educational leaders as either exemplary (45.8 percent) or good (54.2 percent). (Contains 14 references.) (DFR)

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WHO'S IN CHARGE AROUND HERE?

by
Tak Cheung Chan, Harbison Pool, and Jessie S. Strickland

> Analyzing leadership . . . is like studying the abominable snowman; you see footprints, but never the thing itself. Leadership is like electricity. You can't see it, but you certainly can't miss its effect. And yet, this elusive, intangible thing we call leadership might very well be the most essential ingredient in personal and business success. (Long, 1998, p. 21)

The researchers have chosen to tackle this abominable snowman and contribute, if possible, to a better understanding of this elusive thing called leadership. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of 50 of the nation's best school superintendents to gain insight into their success. Each year the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) sponsors an annual event which identifies the top leaders, state by state, in the country. The 50 *Superintendents of the Year* for 2000 were no exception to this rich tradition (the third author of this paper was Tennessee's 2000 *Superintendent of the Year*).

The Methodology, Participants, and Instrument

In this study the researchers used a self-designed instrument, containing 38 quantifiable items in five sections: (a) the superintendent's background, (b) the superintendent's school district, (c) the superintendent's role, (d) the superintendent and his or her school board, and (e) the superintendent's leadership perspective.

Data collected in this study were analyzed by basic descriptive statistics. The SPSS program was employed to calculate means, frequencies, and standard deviations. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the statistical differences of the participants' responses by selected demographic variables. Post-hoc tests were performed where items indicated significant differences. Only major statistics are summarized in this report.

The researchers sent their *Leadership Survey of the Year 2000 Recipients of the Superintendent of the Year Award*, as the title of the instrument implies, to all 50 Year 2000 superintendents of the year (all states but Hawaii and Vermont name superintendents of the year; in the year 2000, two overseas superintendents, one in Europe, one in Asia/Pacific Islands, were also among those recognized). The overall respondent return was a remarkable 96% (48). One of the two superintendents who did not participate was male, one female; one was from a mid-Atlantic state, one from a Southern state. The study was predominantly quantitative, though the survey did provide open-ended opportunities.

The Profile of Participating Superintendents

As shown in Table 1, 37 of the 48 responding superintendents (77.1%) were male, 11 (22.9%) female. Most were white, at least 46 years of age, and well educated. All but one respondent had a degree beyond the bachelor's; over two thirds had earned a doctorate. All but three were appointed to their positions.

Table 1. Biographical Profile of Responding Superintendents

Sex (N = 48)	Male				Female					
	37		77.1%		11		22.9%			
Race (48)	White				Other					
	46		95.8%		2		4.2%			
Age (48)	36-45			46-55			Over 55			
	3		6.3%	29		60.4%	16		33.3%	
Highest Degree Earned (47)	BA/BS		MA/MS/MEd		EdS		EdD/PhD			
	1	2.1%	11	23.4%	3	6.4%	32	68.1%		
How Selected (47)	Appointed				Elected					
	44		93.6%		3		6.4%			
Years in Current Position (48)	1-4		5-7		8-10		11-20			
	11	22.9%	17	35.4%	9	18.8%	11	22.9%		
Years as a Superintendent (48)	1-4		5-7		8-10		11-20		Over 20	
	7	14.6%	10	20.8%	9	18.8%	18	37.5%	4	8.3%
Immediate Prior Position (48)	Asst. Supt.		Dir./Coor.		Dist. Supv.		Principal		Other	
	28	58.3%	4	8.3%	1	2.1%	11	22.9%	4	8.3%
Have Served as Mentor to a New Superintendent (48)	Yes, to a Male			Yes, to a Female			No			
	17		35.4%	13		27.1%	25		52.1%	

More superintendents (17; 35.4%) fell into the 5- to 7-year range than any other category for length of service in their current positions, though more than one fifth were in their first four years in their present role, a like size group having served for 11 to 20 years. A number had served in other superintendencies prior to their present position. More than a third had mentored a new male superintendent, over a fourth a new female superintendent (some falling into both categories). However, more than half had never served as a designated mentor to someone just beginning in the superintendency.

Responding award-winning superintendents had served in a variety of roles in their long tenure in education. Nearly three in five were elevated to the superintendency through an assistant or associate superintendency. About a fifth came directly from the principalship, with the remaining fifth coming from a variety of positions. More than three of four participating superintendents (37; 77.1%) have served as school principals at some point in their careers. All have taught and more than half (26; 54.2%) have coached.

The School Districts the Superintendents Serve

As noted above, all parts of the United States (and two districts overseas) were represented in the nearly universal sample who responded to the *Leadership Survey*. All district sizes from districts with fewer than 500 students to large districts with 50,001 to 100,000 students were represented (see Table 2), with about a fifth each in districts with 2,500 to 5,000 students, districts with 5,001 to 10,000 students, and districts with 10,001 to 25,000 students. One fourth, and the largest respondent group, served in a school district with a student population between 2,500 and 5,000. Over 69% had student populations between 2,501 to 25,000.

Table 2. Participating Superintendents' School Districts

District Size According to Student Population (N = 48)	Below 500		500-1,000		1,001-2,500		2,501-5,000	
	2	4.2%	3	6.3%	5	10.4%	11	22.9%
	5,001-10,000		10,001-25,000		25,001-50,000		50,001-100,000	
	10	20.8%	10	20.8%	5	20.8%	2	4.2%
District Setting (48)	Mostly Urban		Mostly Suburban		Mostly Rural/Small Town			
	9	18.8%	20	41.7%	21	43.8%		

Respondents were asked to identify their districts' settings as mostly urban, mostly suburban, or mostly urban. Two participants, however, checked two categories. More than two fifths of the superintendents said they worked in mostly suburban districts, a similar number in

mostly rural/small-town districts. Fewer than one in five of the AASA Superintendent of the Year award winners for the Year 2000 work in mostly urban districts.

No clear pattern was evident among the respondents' districts as to the percentage of male to female administrators at either the district or site levels. The researchers were somewhat surprised to learn that not one district in the sample had a formal mentorship program for new administrators.

The Superintendents' Role

Konnert and Augenstein (1995) observed that superintendents operate much of the time in a fishbowl environment, perhaps especially so for small-district superintendents. Every action is closely scrutinized. Constantly being the center of attention can be exciting and exhilarating, but it can also be frustrating and stressful. In reality, according to Konnert and Augenstein, the superintendent is on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

No superintendents in this study said he or she worked for 40 or fewer hours a week (see Table 3). More than 85% of reporting Superintendents of the Year 2000 worked 50 hours or more a week. Indeed, better than two of five worked more than 60 hours a week.

Table 3. Superintendents' Work Week

Typical Work Week (N = 48)	41-50 Hours		51-60 Hours		More Than 61 Hours	
	6	12.5%	21	43.8%	21	43.8%

The average percentage of time respondents devoted to different types of school district activities are displayed in Table 4. General district management consumes 40% of these chief executives time. The next most prominent category of activity was curriculum and instruction, with participating superintendents, on average, giving about one fifth of their time to this essential component of what schools are for.

Table 4. How Superintendents Spend Their Time

Activities to Which Superintendents Devote Their Time (N = 48)	Area of Activity	% of Time Devoted
	General district management	40
	Personnel matters	10
	Curriculum/instruction	20
	Student/extracurricular activities	5
	Community-related activities	10
	Other activities	15

Half of these award-winning superintendents organize their work and correspondence primarily through their in and out baskets, 31% favor the use of technology support, 21.4% delegate to others, and 7.1% use other methods. Konnert and Augenstein (1995) reported similar findings.

Unquestionably, the superintendency can prove to be a highly stressful position. The nature of the job creates all types of frustrations, conflict, and pressure. Kowalski (1999) and Wiggins (1988) found in their studies that the typical superintendent perceives his or her role as moderately stressful. They note that there is a variety of opinion as to the type of school district that is most stressful to lead. Some superintendents serving small-town districts contended that their work was the most stressful, because there was little or no support staff. On the other hand, Goldstein (1992) found that superintendents serving larger school districts often argue that the intense politics in urban areas and at the helm of a large bureaucracy is even more stressful.

Surprisingly, three out of four top school leaders in this study reported they only occasionally, rarely, or never experienced stress; only 18.8% (9) indicated daily symptoms. Thirty survey respondents (62.5%) said they addressed their stress with daily exercise. Only 3 respondents (6.3%) relied on medication to relieve stress.

All effective leaders seek counsel from others. Their confidantes may be family members. Or, they may rely on a mentor--someone who "knows the ropes." The mentor is a critical contact for the protégé, because he or she is an influential person who helps one achieve his or her goal. Many mentors invite their protégés to seek out those experts who can help build their knowledge base. More than 40% of the superintendents surveyed in this study who needed to learn about school board/superintendent relationships went to the board chair. Not surprisingly, for information or advice on legal issues, 90.5% of the respondents spoke to their board attorneys. For information on the overall operation of the school system, state issues, district issues, and current trends, more responding district CEOs relied on other colleagues in the superintendency as their primary source of outside wisdom. More participants turned to community leaders than any other source for advice on community issues.

Top School Leaders Communicating With Their School Boards

Konnert and Augenstein (1995) found that the manner in which a school superintendent communicates with his or her board tends to vary with the size of the district and the leadership style of the superintendent. They stated that most superintendents have written contact with their boards at least once a week. The makeup of a board and the relationship of the superintendent with his or her board have a direct bearing on the relative success of the superintendent and, in many cases, of the district.

Boards represented in this study were composed of 60% males and 40% females, but board chairs were evenly split between the sexes. Interestingly, only about half of board members have school-age children. However, all but 7.1% of responding superintendents indicated that "all" or "most" of the members of their school boards have the best interest of students as their primary reason for serving.

Three fourths of the reporting AASA Superintendent of the Year 2000 award recipients use the telephone as their primary mode of communication with their boards. They use e-mail and fax for this purpose less frequently and traditional letters ("snail mail") least often. Three of four participating superintendents indicated that they spoke with their board chairperson at least one a week, with one of four communicating as much as three times a week. Prior to board meetings, over one third of the superintendents reported contact with the board chair, another third will all members of their boards. One fourth get in touch with the majority of their members, while fewer than 10% make no contact at all before a board meeting.

Participating superintendents said that most (71.4%) of their board members came fully prepared to board meetings and that fewer than 10% arrived at meetings completely unprepared. Ninety-three percent of represented school boards perceive their role as policy makers and do not interfere with the day-to-day operation. These superintendents report that a like proportion (three out of four) of their board members usually bring complaints directly to them. The authors have observed that some board members become overly concerned and involved with employment practices or the general day-to-day operation of the school district and that, at one time or another, such matters present difficulties for many superintendents.

It is worth noting that, despite their understanding of--and adherence to--what most authorities characterize as the proper school board/superintendency relationship and respective roles, reporting superintendents did say that board members had asked them "to change their minds" on a number of issues (see Table 5). Board members appear to second-guess the superintendent on financial/budgetary issues more than any others.

Table 5. Issues on Which Superintendents Have Been Asked by Board Members to "Change Their Minds"

Issues on Which Superintendents Have Been Asked to "Change Their Minds" (N = 48)	Issue	Percentage
	Hiring personnel	38.1
	Firing personnel	23.8
	Other personnel-related decision	38.1
	Student disciplinary action	38.1
	Financial/budgetary decision	45.2

Respondents' Concept of the Ideal Superintendent

Particularly intriguing were survey participants' responses to a list of traits or behaviors which were contrasted in 25 forced choices; which trait or behavior, they were asked, did they believe it was more important for the ideal superintendent to possess? The traits and behaviors displayed in Table 6 are often vital, from the researchers' perspective, as to how the superintendent carries out his or her leadership and management responsibilities.

Table 6. Respondents' Views of Appropriate Behaviors and Traits for the Ideal Superintendent to Display

Trait and Behavior Choices of the Ideal Superintendent			
The Ideal Superintendent Is More:	***%***	***Than He or She Is:***	***%***
Observant, discerning	100.0	Accepting, pacifying	0.0
Contemporary, current	93.8	Mainstream, restrained	6.3
Child/youth oriented	93.6	Teacher oriented	6.4
Collaborative, collegial	91.7	Self-reliant, independent	8.3
Dependable, loyal	87.5	Plucky, dauntless	12.5
Constructively critical	81.3	Nonjudgmental	18.8
Open, outgoing	81.3	Controlled, self-contained	18.8
Assertive, determined	79.2	Gentle, easy going	20.8
Extroverted, gregarious	79.2	Quiet, unobtrusive	20.8
Organized, systematic	79.2	Informal, relaxed	20.8
Ethical, scrupulous	76.6	Expedient, practical	23.8
Innovative, change oriented	70.8	Patient, steady	29.2
Perceptive, insightful	68.8	Knowledgeable, informed	31.3
Tolerant, lenient	68.1	Uncompromising, exacting	31.9
Traditional, conventional	64.6	Outspoken, unconventional	35.4
Visionary, altruistic	62.5	Flexible, pragmatic	37.5
Enthusiastic, passionate	60.4	Calm, poised	39.6
Resourceful, ingenious	60.4	Political, resilient	39.6
Personable, congenial	59.6	Humane, compassionate	40.4
Risk taking, bold	58.3	Moderate, temperate	41.7
Productive, efficient	57.4	Conscientious, industrious	42.6
Relationship oriented	54.2	Task/goal oriented	45.8
Commonsensical	52.1	Research based	47.9
Solid, realistic	52.1	Imaginative, idealistic	47.9
Inspiring, encouraging	51.1	Competent, skilled	48.9

Instructions informed respondents that the traits or behaviors were not always opposites and they might consider both to be desirable and even achievable; in such instances they were told to pick the option which they believed to be the more critical or more important. In some cases, researchers suspect respondents had a difficult decision to make, seeing both alternatives as being desirable. The first two items, to illustrate, were listed in the survey in this way:

> If forced to choose, do you think the ***ideal superintendent*** should be more:
>
> ___ Constructively critical ***or*** ___ Nonjudgmental
> ___ Accepting, pacifying ***or*** ___ Observant, discerning

Items are presented in Table 6 in the order in which one trait or behavior dominated over another, with the ones on which more respondents agreed listed first. In each instance, the favored choice is listed first (regardless of which order the item was listed in the survey). Thus, the item listed first indicates that the ideal superintendent is more *observant, discerning*, than he or she is *accepting, pacifying*, because there was a clearer division on this item than any other, with, in fact, an amazing 100%--all--of the respondents choosing *observant*, none selecting *accepting*. By contrast, the last-listed items in the table--*inspiring, encouraging*, over *competent, skilled*, was almost evenly split among respondents (51.1% for *inspiring*, 48.9% for *competent*). A careful review of this table reveals much about the ideal superintendent, at least as perceived by AASA Superintendent of the Year 2000 award winners.

The ideal superintendent who emerges is one who is alert, up-to-date, and cares about students first and others later. He or she works well with others and is outgoing and a go-getter. This person is efficient and ethical. He or she is innovative and imaginative, but probably not way-out. He or she cares. His or her job can make a difference and this person will work hard to see that it does so.

Kowalski (1999) states that superintendents are often criticized for being preoccupied with the political and managerial aspects of their work. The criticism is usually based on the belief that administrators spend far too little time providing leadership for educational programs and far too much with nuts-and-bolts matters, sometimes referred to as *administrivia*. Although management is considered to be less important than leadership, adds Kowalski, the management function remains an inescapable reality in the superintendency.

Three out of four school leaders participating in this study indicated that the majority of their role was that of leadership rather than management. Nine of 10 superintendents answering the *Leadership Survey* perceived their most frequently employed leadership style to be either collaborative (70.8%) or situational (18.8%), as opposed to directive, compromising, accommodating, or delegating.

All responding superintendents rated their own overall performance as educational leaders as either exemplary (45.8%) or good (54.2%), none as mediocre or weak. All but one

respondent characterized the overall caliber of leadership provided by all or most of the other administrators in their districts as similarly strong (50.0% exceptional, 47.9% good).

More than two out of five of the award-winning superintendents in this study acknowledged the person who most contributed to their success in the superintendency as another superintendent (20; 41.7%). About mentors for new superintendents, Konnert and Augenstein (1995) say that, "most often this person is another superintendent in the school system of the aspiring superintendent candidate. The mentor superintendent sponsors the aspiring candidate for important assignments or by positions, and, most importantly, imparts his/her blessing, indicating, this is my choice" (p. 235). Other most prominent influences mentioned by at least five respondents were, in this order, one's spouse, one's mother, one's father, and a professor.

Factors That Make a Difference in the "Ideal" Leadership Perception

Female and male ideal perceptions of leadership were the same in 24 of 25 items surveyed. Males' ideal superintendent would be more *tolerant and lenient* than *uncompromising and exact*; female respondents opted for the latter over the former. No difference were observed by race (of course, as previously noted, there were only two nonwhite respondents).

From the 25 items of comparison, only four items showed significant difference by age. For example, top school leaders in the age groups of 36-45 years of age and 55 years or older perceived the ideal superintendent to be more *controlled and self-contained*. The respondents in the age group of 46-55, by contrast, thought it was more important to be *open and outgoing*. No significant differences among level of education were found.

Respondents having from 1 to 20 years experience as a superintendent thought it was more important to be *collaborative and collegial* than to be *self-reliant and independent*, more *open and outgoing* than *controlled and self-contained*, and more *humane and compassionate* than *personable and congenial*. Those with more than 20 years in the superintendency place more value on *self-reliance and independence*, on *maintaining control and being self-contained*, and on being *humane and compassionate*. Superintendents with 5 to 7 years' superintendency experience saw the ideal leader as more *outspoken and unconventional* than did the other age groups; others placed more value on *tradition and convention*. Superintendents with the most experience on the job want an ideal school-system leader to be *plucky and dauntless*, whereas less experienced award-recipient superintendents believe it is more important to be *dependable and loyal*.

Implications and Parting Thoughts

Perhaps, the greatest implication revealed by the study was the need for leadership training institutions, state agencies, and school district boards to collaborate in developing high-quality mentoring programs for "new" superintendents. The findings of this study clearly point to the fact that superintendents look to their fellow superintendents for help. Another important

implication is the need for more diversity in the superintendents' pool. Females and minorities need to be better represented in the superintendency ranks. Female/male ratios appear to be better among board leaders and site administrators, if the districts in this study are any guide.

These top superintendents are extremely hard working and, the researchers would guess, wish to devote even more of their precious time to curriculum and instruction, although the 20% average time give to this most critical area of interest by these award-winning superintendents is probably better than the current average among all superintendents. Even though superintendents did not reveal that the multiple jobs they perform interfered with their ability to succeed, the hours devoted to their successful performance in their various duties may raise serious questions about their workload and their being stretched too many ways. The researchers did note that most of these outstanding superintendents do appear to have coped quite well with the stress level they encounter.

The researchers intend to continue to analyze the mountain of data they have collected to attempt to determine what it takes to be a successful superintendent and what, indeed, the ideal superintendent really would look like. What is that an aspiring superintendent can do to make it more likely that he or she will be successful once on the job? What can school boards and others concerned with the district chief executive's performance to recognize and hire truly promising persons and help their extant leaders to have a more productive and satisfying leadership experience. Obviously, it is the students who will benefit or suffer because of a good or a bad decision.

Houston (2001) puts a spin on the superintendency that the writers think provides a good ending to this paper: "While the job is fraught with external pressures, it is filled with internal possibilities for school leaders. Superintendents know they can change the trajectory of children's lives, alter the behavior of organizations, and expand the possibilities of whole communities" (p. 429). The authors believe that the profile of the successful superintendent begins with just this sort of thinking.

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